

The “Tik Tok Issue,” Part 1: Exploring TikTok



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As the current social media platform of choice for college students, Tik Tok is hard to ignore. This alone makes its potential ban in the United States worth examining. Every social media service is inextricably entangled in messy geopolitics. How many of us understand how Tik Tok works, let alone whether or not it should be banned? Tik Tok's situation raises important privacy and free speech questions without clear cut answers including which entities (platforms or otherwise) should be allowed to collect user data and for what purposes. Things get messy pretty quickly when you consider that Tik Tok's competitors (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, etc.) have much to gain from a ban. Regardless of where you stand, understanding more about Tik Tok is an important first step in forming a position. In this two-part newsletter, we will explore both the user experience of Tik Tok and the ethical implications of its potential ban. This first part encourages some critical play with the platform itself in order to figure out what sorts of content Tik Tok nudges its users towards through its recommendation system. The popular source this round is a podcast that explores just how strange Tik Tok is and performs some educated speculation as to why its content suggestions feel eerily accurate. This then leads to the article which provides insight about extremism on TikTok while also modeling a very applicable course assignment.

Popular Media

Dzotsi, Emmaneul and Alex Glodman, hosts. "Gleeks and Gurgles." *Reply All*, 22 July 2021, <https://gimletmedia.com/shows/reply-all/z3h78d6>.

In "Gleeks and Gurgles," *Reply All* hosts Emmanuel and Alex talk with producer and TikTok user, Anna, who's sister started being recommended videos related to a long-past interest in the show *Glee* and also a rare medical condition that prevents her from being able to burp. The really weird thing is that she never searched for *Glee* content or even knew that her inability to burp was something that afflicted other people (she never made a video about it and she never searched for content related to it). After digging through TikTok's privacy policy, Emmanuel, Alex, and Anna deduce that TikTok has essentially marked every single video into many, many subcategories (some more ridiculous than the others) and it uses these distinctions to find obscure connections between content (most of which has nothing to do with the content itself and more to do with how users are interacting with it).

Academic Article and Assignment/Activity

Little, Olivia and Abbie Richards. "TikTok's Algorithm Leads Users from Transphobic Videos to Far-Right Rabbit Holes." *Media Matters for America*, 5 Oct. 2021, <https://www.mediamatters.org/tiktok/tiktoks-algorithm-leads-users-transphobic-videos-far-right-rabbit-holes>.

In this study of Tik Tok's "For You Page" recommendation algorithm, Media Matters researchers Olivia Little and Abbie Richards started a fresh account and interested with transphobic content to see where it led (spoiler: the far-right corners of the platform). As Richards explains in her excellent [Tik Tok video breakdown](#) of their study, they wanted to see if "transphobia was a gateway prejudice that leads to broader, far-right radicalization." What makes this study so interesting is that the researchers only sought out and interacted with transphobic content, and yet they were recommended racist content all the same. The report is a good read, but the "Tik Tok" version does a great job explaining the research question, method/ology, and findings in about two and a half minutes; it also acts as a good model for smaller scale studies students can design and execute in the classroom around their own research interests.

Upcoming for the DRPC

Look for our virtual, synchronous panel, "A Hybrid Resource for Teaching and Learning about Privacy and Surveillance: The Digital Rhetorical Privacy Collective" featuring Advisory Board members Cecilia Shelton, Charles Woods, Gavin Johnson, and Noah Wason at the upcoming Computers and Writing 2023 conference at University of California, Davis (Session A.03 Friday, June 23, 10:15-11:30am)